Between Faith, Family, and Fear: An Ethnographic Study of Honour-Related Violence in Muslim Communities in Western Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

Background: This article examines honour-related violence within Muslim communities in Western Uttar Pradesh—a region shaped by patriarchal kinship structures and recurring communal tensions, especially after the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots. While honour crimes in India are often theorised within Hindu caste frameworks, their manifestation among Muslims—shaped by intersecting gender norms, *biradari* hierarchies, and communal politics—remains under-explored. This study addresses that gap by analysing how *izzat* (honour) functions not merely as a familial value but as a broader mechanism of communal regulation.

Methodology: Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, and Shamli, the study draws on interviews with survivors, families, clerics, activists, and police, along with participant observation and document analysis. It shows how honour is enforced through surveillance, coercion, and violence—legitimised by clerics and community networks, and often reinforced by state institutions through indifference or tacit support.

Conclusion: The study finds that honour is not a static tradition but a politicised discourse that transforms communal anxieties into moral imperatives—particularly around women's autonomy and interfaith relationships. It functions as a gendered and communal strategy of control, sustained through both everyday practices and institutional complicity. The article calls for responses beyond legal reform to address structural patriarchy, state impunity, and to support intersectional, community-driven feminist interventions. By reframing honour as a political and relational construct, the study opens new pathways for theorising gendered violence in communally polarised societies.

Keywords: Honour-related violence; Muslim communities; Western Uttar Pradesh; Gender and Patriarchy; Communal Politics; Interfaith Relationships; State Complicity

Introduction

Honour killings in India have traditionally been examined within Hindu caste societies, where they function as instruments to enforce endogamy and patriarchal control over women's sexuality (Chakravarti, 2003; Chowdhry, 1997). However, the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots underscored the urgency of exploring how honour operates within Muslim communities—where gender norms, *biradari* (caste-like) hierarchies, and communal marginalisation intersect in distinct and under-theorised ways. This article investigates honour-related violence in Muslim communities of Western Uttar Pradesh, where *izzat* (honour) functions as a flexible, contested, and ideologically charged mechanism of control—shaped simultaneously by traditional kinship structures and shifting political anxieties.

Existing scholarship falls short in three critical areas. First, it tends to homogenise Muslim communities under the broad rubric of "minority patriarchy" or restricts analysis to diasporic and migration contexts (Sen, 2005; Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2010). Second, it rarely examines how honour codes are navigated in rural or semi-urban Muslim societies amid intensifying political polarisation. Third, it overlooks what Crenshaw (1989) terms "intersectional invisibility"—the failure to apprehend how Muslim women experience violence at the crossroads of gender, religion, caste, and community surveillance. This study seeks to address these lacunae through grounded, place-based ethnographic inquiry.

Theoretically, the article draws on feminist anthropology and critical violence studies to conceptualise honour not as a cultural residue but as a dynamic form of social regulation. It builds on Abu-Lughod's (1999) framework of moral governance and Mahmood's (2005) notion of ethical subject formation to explore how families and clerics recast patriarchal control as moral and religious duty. Gill's (2009) idea of "honour as discipline" further informs the analysis of how surveillance, shaming, and coercion operate as everyday mechanisms of control. Crucially, this study extends these frameworks by showing how honour is intensified in post-conflict contexts like Muzaffarnagar, where communal violence reconfigures gender policing into a mode of collective defence.

Fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2016 across Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, and Shamli revealed three interlocking dynamics. First, families enforce honour through what Kandiyoti (1988) calls the "patriarchal bargain," wherein women internalise surveillance as protection. Second, clerics legitimise such enforcement through selective religious interpretations, offering what Engineer (2003) terms a "theological cover" for caste and gender hierarchies.

Third, state institutions facilitate honour-based control through what Baxi et al. (2006) describe as "strategic indifference," particularly in communally sensitive settings.

This article challenges dominant narratives in three ways. First, it rejects the framing of honour-related violence as a pathological feature of Muslim culture, instead situating it within broader structures of power. Second, it illustrates how communal politics transforms honour from a private concern into a collective imperative. Third, it calls for intersectional responses that hold both community and state actors accountable. By centring survivor narratives, the study presents honour not as a static cultural tradition but as a politically adaptive strategy—entwined with fear, faith, and the struggle for belonging in contemporary India.

Methodology

This ethnographic study explores honour-related violence in Muslim communities across three districts of Western Uttar Pradesh—Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, and Shamli—selected for their histories of communal tension and documented instances of honour-based harm. The research employed in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to capture both institutional dynamics and everyday enactments of violence. Fieldwork was conducted between 2014 and 2016 with survivors, family members, clerics, NGO workers, and police officials, alongside extended immersion in homes, mosques, and public spaces where gender norms are actively negotiated and enforced.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Given the sensitivity of the topic, interviews with survivors were conducted with the assistance of a female research associate to ensure comfort and safety. Informed consent was obtained, and all participants were anonymised using pseudonyms. As a male, non-Muslim outsider, my positionality inevitably shaped access and interpretation. To build trust and mitigate these asymmetries, I collaborated closely with the grassroots organisation *Astitwa* and its founder Rehana Adeeb, whose deep community engagement facilitated access and helped validate field insights.

Participant observation was essential to understanding the informal, often unspoken mechanisms of honour enforcement. However, access to certain decision-making spaces—such as *panchayats* and local dispute forums—was limited, requiring reliance on second-hand accounts from participants and mediators.

The study acknowledges key limitations. Conservative families most invested in honour norms were often hesitant to participate, and official records such as FIRs frequently obscured honour as a motive, reframing cases as domestic disputes. Nonetheless, triangulating interviews, observation, and document analysis—including *fatwas*, FIRs, and regional media coverage—allowed for a contextually grounded understanding of how honour is produced, regulated, and justified.

By foregrounding survivor narratives and examining institutional responses, the methodology bridges lived experience and structural critique, situating honour-related violence within broader systems of gendered and communal control.

Results: Structures of Honour and Violence in Western Uttar Pradesh

1. Family as the Primary Enforcer of Honour

Across the fieldwork, the family consistently emerged as the primary site for enforcing *izzat* (honour), closely tied to female sexual propriety, caste-endogamous marriage norms, and male guardianship. Families acted not only as cultural agents but also as symbolic and material custodians of honour—treating it as a form of reputational capital that shapes marriage alliances, social standing, and moral legitimacy. Transgressions around gender roles or marital choices were rarely viewed as personal decisions; rather, they were treated as collective failures demanding correction or punishment.

One case involved a young woman from Shamli who eloped with a Dalit Hindu man. Her relatives, under the pretext of reconciliation, brought her back, confined her indoors for weeks, and severed her communication with the outside world. She recalled, *"They said I had erased their name. I was not a daughter anymore but a stain they had to clean."* In another instance from Muzaffarnagar, a man who married outside his *biradari* without familial approval was publicly disowned. His father told neighbours, *"He is dead to us,"* and vowed never to perform his last rites.

These cases reflect what Kandiyoti (1988) calls the "patriarchal bargain," wherein women internalise control as protection, and male kin derive honour by enforcing conformity. Honour enforcement within families operates through physical coercion, symbolic expulsion, and ritualised disavowal. Such actions are often rationalised through selective religious references and appeals to *sharafat* (respectability), even when they contravene legal or constitutional protections.

Abu-Lughod (1999) similarly argues that honour is not a residual tradition but a form of modern moral governance, enacted through kinship rather than formal institutions. Veena Das (2007) further demonstrates how everyday life becomes the terrain where violence is both normalised and made intimate—where familial ties simultaneously nurture and discipline. In this context, the family emerges as a central institution of informal surveillance and normative control, blurring the boundaries between care, coercion, and collective punishment.

2. Clerical Authority and the Sanctification of Control

Clerics (*maulvis*) frequently play a pivotal role in legitimising family-led enforcement of honour norms. Their religious authority is often invoked to provide moral sanction for actions such as withdrawal of girls from school, restrictions on mobility, or even punitive measures against perceived transgressions. In one striking example, *pesh imams* from 14 mosques in Bijnor district issued a *fatwa* banning women from watching television, attending public gatherings, or listening to music, and established a local monitoring committee to ensure compliance (Times News Network, 2006). Although the *fatwa* had no legal force, it wielded immense symbolic power, shaping behavioural codes in ways that reinforced patriarchal control.

This form of religious enforcement illustrates what Mahmood (2005) calls the "ethical formation of subjects," where submission to moral authority is internalised as virtue rather than experienced as coercion. However, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2000) argues, religious authority is neither fixed nor monolithic—it is continually contested and reconstructed in local contexts. In Western Uttar Pradesh, clerical edicts often merge Islamic values with *biradari* politics and caste ideologies, offering religious legitimacy to otherwise socially punitive practices.

This legitimation can escalate from moral guidance to violent enforcement. In May 2017, in Asmoli village (Sambhal district), a 20-year-old Muslim woman was shot by her brother—while their father watched—because she was in a relationship with a Hindu man. The attacker was arrested and charged with attempted murder (Hindustan Times, 2017). Though not directly linked to any religious decree, the rhetoric used by the family invoked communal and moral justifications—demonstrating how perceived violations of honour, particularly in interfaith relationships, are framed as existential threats to family and religious identity.

Through such interventions, clerics help recast coercion as moral instruction and depoliticise violence as communal ethics. Their authority allows patriarchal control to appear not as social domination, but as spiritual duty. In doing so, they provide a form of symbolic cover that shields families from both legal accountability and internal dissent—further entrenching honour as a sacred imperative and placing women's autonomy in direct opposition to community survival.

3. Community Surveillance and Informal Sanctions

Beyond the family and clerical authority, community networks—especially in semi-urban and rural settings—serve as vigilant and often punitive enforcers of moral codes. In these localities, *izzat* (honour) is perceived not as a private asset but as a collective good. Its violation is treated as a form of contamination that endangers the symbolic purity and cohesion of the wider *mohalla* or village. Relationships that cross caste or religious lines—even when legally recognised—are met with informal sanctions ranging from social boycotts and public humiliation to economic exclusion.

In one case from Muzaffarnagar, a Muslim woman and a lower-caste Hindu man, who had married through the Special Marriage Act, were forced to relocate four times in two years. Despite a formal declaration of consent before a magistrate, the woman's family publicly claimed she had been "kidnapped." Shopkeepers refused to sell them groceries, landlords evicted them citing "safety concerns," and eventually, the couple fled the district altogether. As one NGO worker put it: *"In their eyes, love is not love. It is war against their rules."*

These forms of community-level enforcement operate through informal institutions—*mohalla* committees, neighbourhood elders, political workers—who mobilise collective outrage and social exclusion. The mechanisms here mirror what Foucault (1977) described as "capillary power," where disciplinary control is dispersed and decentralised, enacted through the minute, everyday acts of watching, reporting, and punishing. As Jeffrey (2010) notes in his work on youth and policing in North India, such everyday moral regulation often derives its legitimacy not from law but from an embedded consensus about "respectable conduct."

Surveillance in these settings is horizontal, participatory, and deeply gendered. It is not merely a by-product of cultural conservatism but a strategic assertion of communal identity, often sharpened by the anxieties of religious and caste boundary-crossing. Women, in particular, are subjected to heightened scrutiny, as their bodies become the terrain upon

which community honour is symbolically defended. Here, control is not always enforced through overt violence, but through the slow, cumulative pressure of social disapproval, withdrawal of support, and reputational damage.

Such informal sanctions, while often dismissed as "soft" forms of discipline, have profound consequences. They push couples into social and economic insecurity, isolate survivors, and sustain a moral order where deviation is rendered both dangerous and unliveable.

4. Police, Law, and the Culture of Complicity

Although Indian law formally criminalises honour-based violence, its enforcement in Western Uttar Pradesh is marked by inaction, procedural delay, and, at times, overt complicity. Survivors routinely report that police refuse to register FIRs, dismiss complaints as "family matters," or align themselves with dominant caste and religious actors—thus reinforcing, rather than disrupting, entrenched power hierarchies.

In one instance, following an inter-caste elopement in Bijnor, police engaged only with the woman's male relatives and declined to file a complaint. *"They said, 'you're lucky your family took you back,'"* the survivor recalled. In another case, a Muslim man who had married a Dalit woman was charged with kidnapping under IPC Section 366, despite the woman's signed affidavit affirming her consent. Such responses are not exceptions; they reflect a broader, systemic tendency.

Baxi et al. (2006) and Irudayam et al. (2011) describe this institutional behaviour as "strategic indifference," whereby the state positions itself as a custodian of community stability rather than a guarantor of individual rights. Flavia Agnes (1999) similarly argues that legal institutions often reinforce patriarchal control, functioning less as neutral arbiters and more as agents of social discipline.

Uma Chakravarti (2005) further shows how the state actively collaborates with familial patriarchy, particularly in cases involving inter-caste or interfaith relationships. She notes that as soon as couples elope, the police often act on behalf of the woman's family—pursuing criminal charges, facilitating forced returns, or enabling custodial confinement. These interventions are rarely questioned, as they are viewed through the lens of protecting familial honour and restoring social order. The state, in such moments, does not merely reflect caste and gender hierarchies—it upholds them.

In communally polarised regions like Western Uttar Pradesh, this complicity intersects with Islamophobic discourses that cast Muslim men as predatory and interfaith relationships as subversive. Through its silences and selective actions, the state thus becomes a key agent in sustaining honour-based regimes.

Victims are punished first by their families and communities, and then abandoned—or further penalised—by the very institutions tasked with their protection. Law enforcement, in this context, does not stand apart from honour-based control; it actively reproduces it under the guise of procedural neutrality.

5. Communal Violence and the Militarisation of Honour

The socio-political landscape of Western Uttar Pradesh—particularly after the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots—is shaped by cycles of communal violence, displacement, and deepening polarisation. In this environment, honour-based anxieties are heightened. Relationships crossing religious or caste boundaries are not merely viewed as familial transgressions but are framed as threats to communal identity. Honour, in such contexts, becomes politicised—no longer a private concern but a collective imperative tied to community survival.

Fieldwork revealed intensified gender policing in the aftermath of riots, particularly within resettlement colonies. In one case, a woman was withdrawn from college after rumours spread about her WhatsApp conversation with a Hindu classmate. Her uncle justified the action, saying, *"We've already lost our homes once. We cannot afford to lose our honour too."* Such narratives reflect how communal trauma fuses with patriarchal control, producing new configurations of moral panic. As Das (2007) and Menon and Bhasin (1998) observe, in moments of collective conflict, women's bodies become symbolic terrain for asserting purity, resistance, and revenge.

This convergence is further weaponised by state and political actors through discourses such as "*love jihad*." In 2020, the Uttar Pradesh government enacted the *Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance*, popularly known as the anti–love jihad law. It criminalises interfaith relationships perceived as coerced religious conversions and prescribes prison terms of up to ten years (Time, 2020). Though framed as a measure to prevent forced conversions, the law enables community interference and targets Muslim men in particular, reinforcing majoritarian fears and gendered surveillance.

Yet, this logic is legally contested. In a recent case from neighbouring Uttarakhand, an interfaith doctor couple faced violent threats while seeking to marry under the *Special Marriage Act, 1954*. The Uttarakhand High Court intervened, directing the police to ensure their safety and affirming their right to choose their partner without coercion (Times of India, 2025). The contrast between protection and persecution underscores how unevenly honour and autonomy are negotiated across legal jurisdictions.

In Western Uttar Pradesh, however, *izzat* increasingly functions as a politicised form of moral regulation, used to suppress women's mobility, criminalise interfaith love, and reinforce community boundaries. Even legally valid acts—such as marriages under the *Special Marriage Act (1954)*—become flashpoints for communal backlash. When the state selectively acts—or fails to act—it signals that the preservation of honour takes precedence over constitutional rights.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that honour-related violence in Muslim communities of Western Uttar Pradesh is not a vestige of tradition but a living, adaptive system of control. It is produced and reproduced at the intersections of kinship structures, religious discourse, community surveillance, and the selective actions of the state. While often framed as cultural or religious practice, honour functions here as a political instrument—regulating gender and sexuality, reinforcing caste boundaries, and responding to the shifting anxieties of a communally polarised society.

At the level of the family, the data show that control over women's sexuality, mobility, and marital choices remains central to the preservation of honour. Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain" captures the implicit social contract wherein women internalise these restrictions as a form of security, while men derive status through their role as protectors and disciplinarians. But honour enforcement is rarely contained within private domains. As Abu-Lughod (1999) and Gill (2009) argue, the reproduction of honour depends on its public enforcement—through social ostracism, ritual shaming, and surveillance that renders individual choices visible and punishable within the broader moral community.

This moral surveillance extends beyond the household to informal institutions—*mohalla* committees, neighbourhood elders, and clerical authorities. Clerics play a pivotal role in authorising and sanctifying these practices. Their interpretations are often not grounded in

Islamic jurisprudence, but in localised patriarchal readings that align with *biradari* politics and caste ideology. Mahmood's (2005) notion of ethical self-formation is useful here, illustrating how religious authority is internalised through everyday practice, making coercion appear as virtue. Yet, as Mir-Hosseini (2000) and Chakravarti (2005) remind us, religious authority is neither monolithic nor natural—it is shaped through social negotiations and is often mobilised to protect entrenched power structures.

This logic is reinforced by the behaviour of state institutions. Police, far from being neutral actors, often operate as agents of community consensus. As Baxi et al. (2006) and Irudayam et al. (2011) show, law enforcement frequently legitimises the moral panic around women's autonomy by refusing to act, delaying intervention, or siding with dominant community actors. Agnes (1999) and Chakravarti (2005) both argue that the legal system is not immune from caste and patriarchal influence; it often functions as an extension of familial control. In elopement cases, for instance, police are quick to act on behalf of the girl's family—framing the matter as abduction rather than consent-based union. In doing so, the state does not merely fail to protect—it actively participates in upholding the honour regime.

What makes this context particularly urgent is the way honour has become fused with communal fear. The legacy of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots, the spread of "love jihad" narratives, and the enactment of laws like the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance (2020) have contributed to a political climate in which honour is no longer just a moral concern—it is imagined as a boundary of collective survival. In such a context, women's choices, especially in interfaith relationships, are cast as existential threats to community cohesion. As Das (2007) and Menon & Bhasin (1998) argue, during times of communal conflict, women's bodies become symbols of both resistance and retribution. They are made to carry the burden of upholding honour while also absorbing its consequences.

Honour, then, emerges as a form of governance—co-produced by religious actors, community networks, families, and the state. It is sustained not just through overt acts of violence but through subtle, everyday practices of regulation: who watches whom, who speaks for whom, and who remains silent. It disciplines bodies, defines legitimacy, and limits autonomy. It is profoundly gendered, yet it is also caste-mediated, class-inflected, and deeply communalised.

This has critical implications for policy and activism. Legal reforms, while necessary, are insufficient. A purely juridical approach fails to account for the structural and cultural mechanisms that allow honour to thrive. What is needed is an intersectional approach that addresses the interconnected systems of patriarchy, caste, communalism, and state complicity. Interventions must centre survivor voices, challenge clerical authority, resist state-backed moral policing, and engage with grassroots feminist efforts that contest these everyday violence.

In recognising honour-related violence as a relational and politically embedded phenomenon, we move beyond narrow explanations rooted in "religion" or "tradition." Instead, we begin to see it as a strategic and evolving mechanism of social control—one that reflects the deeper fault lines of Indian society.

Conclusion

This article has examined how honour-related violence in Muslim communities of Western Uttar Pradesh is shaped by the interplay of familial control, clerical sanction, communal surveillance, and state complicity. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, it demonstrates that honour is not a static cultural value but a fluid and strategic mechanism of governance—used to police gender, contain sexuality, enforce endogamy, and manage community boundaries under conditions of social and political strain.

By centring survivor narratives and situating them within wider structures of power, the study reveals that honour is not simply enforced through violence but sustained through everyday practices—surveillance, exclusion, symbolic punishment, and legal inaction. In contexts of communal polarisation, these practices intensify: women's choices become sites of anxiety, and honour is transformed into a collective mandate that conflates morality with community survival. The increasing politicisation of honour—through narratives like "love jihad" or laws that criminalise interfaith intimacy—further erodes the distinction between familial care, religious authority, and state power.

The findings challenge essentialist readings of honour-based violence as a pathological feature of Islam or Muslim culture. Instead, they call attention to the caste, class, and communal configurations that underpin its reproduction. Far from being confined to tradition, honour is embedded in modern institutions—police stations, courts, *panchayats*, and even

media discourse. It is enforced not just by families or clerics, but also by neighbours, politicians, and bureaucrats.

Responding to honour-related violence, therefore, requires more than criminal legislation or individual rescue. It demands structural interventions that dismantle the everyday architecture of patriarchy, casteism, and majoritarian nationalism. This includes holding the state accountable for its complicity, challenging the clerical moral economy, and supporting grassroots feminist and constitutional struggles that affirm autonomy, dignity, and dissent.

To deconstruct honour is to confront the multiple systems that make it sacred. Only by doing so can we begin to imagine an ethical and political order in which freedom is not seen as betrayal and love is not punished as defiance.

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